

# The Sun.

## BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

TWELVE  
PAGES

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 1918.

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SECTION  
FIVE

# "Birth": a Memorable Novel

In Writing of a Paperhanger, His Wife and Their Son Living  
in a Little Wisconsin Town Zona Gale Does Her Finest Book

IF paperhangers had been in the '80s the masterful characters that they are now Zona Gale could never have written *Birth*. That is, she would have found it necessary, in order that her hero should struggle sufficiently, to make him something low and professional like an editor, and then there wouldn't have been any local color, which is the best thing she does, as any one who has read *Friendship Village* and *Neighborhood Stories* will concede. Being an editor now means having all of a laboring man's hardships with none of his alleviations. An author who chooses to write of the so-called laboring classes in this gilded age does wisely in setting the clocks back a quarter of a century or so.

Few of us, probably, realized when this author began her literary career some twelve years ago that she would ever produce a novel as big as *Birth*. It is free from attack by those three damning adjectives which are so constantly applied to novels of the day, "sunshiny," "sweet" and "charming." Sunshine is as far from its pages as the poles from each other, its sweetness is so rare as to be negligible, and the charm consists in delightful and continuous humor, often sharp and never overkind, which isn't at all what people mean by "charming" in the new and popular sense. But here is real substance of things more to be desired than the fine gold of sunshine. Miss Gale is incurably funny and we love her for it—witness the delivery horse, "hanging out its tongue, not at all because of fast driving but from preference," and Mis' Henry Bates, whose stomach wouldn't allow her to drink coffee. "She always spoke" (to quote directly), "as if her stomach stood back of her chair."

Miss Gale has the middle Western fondness for laying scenes where she can keep a motherly eye on them, and she plays true to form in this case by never allowing the action to get any farther away from the small town of Burage, Wis., than Chicago, and then only for brief periods. Whatever fault you may find with the story, you must agree that the village life and people are inimitably done. It cannot be said of Miss Gale, as it has of a contemporary novelist by an English critic, that she "encircles a plain story with a local atmosphere as a bookbinder binds a book or chef puts a frill around a mutton cutlet."

### Two Are Wed.

*Birth* achieves the rare result of being both mystical and colloquial. You wouldn't, for instance, expect a novel which is prefaced by the quotation, "The world's greatest need is a sense of the intangible," and which sets about to prove it, to open upon a travelling salesman with pickle and fruit products, and yet there is something peculiarly satisfying about this opening scene. It is not necessary for Marshall Pitt, the pickle salesman (later lured into paperhanging), to stick his foot in the door after the approved manner of his kind in order to claim our attention. From the moment he appears, "having nothing to recommend him," he is of course recommended at once.

Barbara Ellsworth, chancing upon him at this time, married to free herself from debt, and promptly despised her victim. She found him, as she did her life, intolerable. If, as we have indi-

cated, labor conditions had been then as they are now everything would have moved along smoothly and uninterestingly. Marshall could have swept aside the debts after a few days' work, and, with as gallant a gesture as his lack of grace allowed sent his wife to Palm Beach, the magnet of her heart's desire. It is true that his wrists were long and thin and freckled, that his coat gave the effect of blowing when there was no wind, and that he irritated Barbara in a thousand ways besides; but there is many a young wife at Palm Beach who finds life not unpleasant in spite of wrists long and unloved at home. And there is always the seashore in summer. As it was, these two who "not only failed to see beyond the externals, but to whom even the externals were veiled," suffered on, Barbara becoming daily more unpleasant and Marshall accordingly more abject and devoted.

### Enter the Third.

"It was in this manner that their child was born. There he was, sentient. A rift in experience, the crossing of the street by Barbara at one moment rather than the next; the opening of a gate by Pitt in the afternoon instead of the morning. Then joy, ill, the depths, madness, flowing about the two. These passed but there remained the child—living, exquisite, sturdy, sensitive, a new microcosm, experiencing within himself the act of God."

In the chapters which follow, particularly that one which deals with the elopement, it must be remembered that Barbara had no mother to guide her, nor even the page on bended knee who was wont to lead the way through forest and dungeon

close for young women of an earlier day. "Barbara had dreamed of love and beauty, and she had missed both. She sought them. This is the epitaph for every woman who fails."

But in seeking them she reckoned without her incumbrance. Any one who has tried eloping with a baby will agree that while it may be done to good effect in song and story, it is impossible in life or realistic novels. The circus man whom Barbara selected as lover was distinctly shocked at the rendezvous to come upon a wholly unsuspected child, and insisted firmly that both mother and child return at once. When Barbara had returned the child she realized that her work was done and removed herself from the story by a swift and complete disappearance. Whether or not she rejoined her lover is left to the imagination, but our strong impression is that after one disillusioning experience he sought and found his prey elsewhere.

If Barbara impresses us as being inconclusive, we may be very sure that this is the impression it is intended we should have. Realizing the weakness of an essential character, a weakness as essential as the woman herself, Miss Gale has used her only so far as she is necessary to development of the plot. It is with Marshall and Jeffrey Pitt, father and son, that we are concerned in the last two books of the novel.

Love is a creative force, and though Marshall Pitt had been unable through the inarticulate material in which his soul was embodied to fashion himself in any accordance with his blurred hopes, he could by virtue of his great love for Barbara and their child offer to Jeffrey the inspiration lacking which his life, even to his last heroic act, had seemed a futile thing. In dying because he lacked cleverness to see the means of escape, to save the only living thing that had loved him in return, he made his last awkward gesture that of rescuing a dog!

"They carried Pitt, and in his arms was a white Marseilles spread in which he had swathed the little dog. The spread was burning, Pitt's hair was burning and the thin cotton of his shirt was all burned away about his throat and breast and blazed upon his shoulders.

"They laid him on the ground and the people beat out the flames. As the fire was quenched there was a terrific motion in the white Marseilles spread. Out leaped Jip, not a silken hair on him singed, and he snapped indignantly at having been caused intolerable inconvenience. . . .

"Well, but of all the fool things. For a dog."

### The Final Impression.

Finishing this novel it is as if you had walked through a beautiful country with a delightful companion, and on returning remembered the companion rather than the things you went to see. It is Miss Gale's own personality, her style and wealth of wit which remain in our memory, and however proper a respect we may feel for the deeply impressive study of the influences in the life of Jeffrey Pitt, we leave it with a certain guilty sensation of having enjoyed it too much. As if, at a solemn religious service, we had laughed outrageously at some one's clever remarks.

BIRTH. By ZONA GALE. The Macmillan Company. \$1.50.

